

The Beauty of the Storm:

Making connections between Dispositions and Building Learning Power

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The conversations and language we use when we identify learning can be the vehicle for children and adults to build learning power. I will be drawing on the work of Guy Claxton and Margaret Carr for this article to deepen understandings around dispositional learning.



Lately, I have been hearing a lot about the dispositions we value in our early childhood centres. Prince William spoke of the courage and determination of New Zealanders, Richie MacCaw speaks of his teams ability to persevere and dig deep when faced with a challenge, Leigh Gibbs the newly appointed coach of the Tactix speaks of hard work and resilience and Bear Grylls said he was impressed with the resilience shown by New Zealanders after the Christchurch earthquake. The list goes on. What is clear is that it is not only in Early Childhood or Education that learning dispositions are valued, rather it is woven through ordinary and extra ordinary experiences in everyday life.

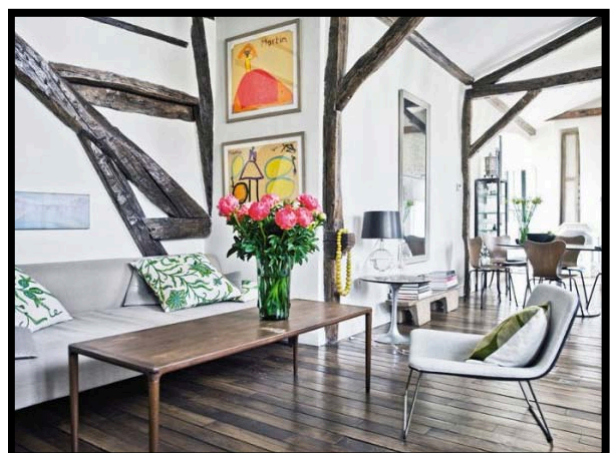
I am reminded of our pioneering past and the resilience and the courage of new immigrants who braved the arduous journey across the miles in search of a new life.



A story passed down through the generations in my family goes something like this: "Imagine if you can what the scene must have been like when your great-great-great-grandmother and great-great-great-grandfather were on a sailing ship bound for New Zealand. They disembarked at Auckland. Passing through the Bay of Biscay they were in the midst of an electrical storm with high seas threatening the ship when the captain ordered all passengers below and the ship to be battened down. Your great-great-great-grandma refused to be battened down and told the captain so. He said, "You must be lashed to the mast, Mrs Barton, if you refuse to go below." She replied, "Lash me to the mast, Captain, for I shall not die like a rat in a trap." Afterwards when the doctor examined her, he asked her if she had been

frightened out there alone. "Frightened!" she said, "I had not time to be frightened it was so wonderful and I shall remember the great beauty of the storm all my life." What incredible determination and resilience my great-great-great-grandmother showed, not to mention her courage and curiosity for the world, and isn't this what we want for all the children we learn with? To show resilience, determination, curiosity and courage? How can we help children to view themselves in this way?

A number of years ago, I went to Melbourne with my daughter and on the last day we visited the National Gallery where there was an exhibition of the work of Martin Grant, a well known Australian clothing designer living in Paris. The exhibition had a variety of dresses he had designed as well as ephemera collected over the years including postcards and photos. On one wall there were two paintings done in tempera or water colour paint on newsprint, they were paintings of dresses done clearly by Martin as young child. What struck me was that not only did someone value these paintings of Martin to save them, but this was obviously a passion of Martin's and someone nurtured this interest to allow it to grow into a creative life. Recently while looking for information about Martin on the internet I came across an article about Martin's home in Paris (Fancy Cribs, 2011) and there on the wall were the paintings I had seen in the art gallery.



In Margaret Carr's (2008, p.) article *Zooming in and zooming out* she writes,

One's identity as a competent learner and knower is to some extent built around the notion of making progress, getting better at something, becoming more expert, and knowing more.

In an early childhood setting, supporting children's interests and passions over time creates opportunities for children to build this image of self, as a competent learner and knower. I did not know Martin as a child, or indeed at all, but I would like to think that through his passions for dress design he had and still has the image of self as a confident and capable learner.

In the New Zealand Herald (2011) Dr Zuckerberg spoke of his son's early interest in the computers he had in his home office and how the exposure to computers contributed to Mark's interest in technology. He went on to say,

Probably the best thing I can say is something that my wife and I have always believed in - rather than impose upon your kids or try and steer their lives in a certain direction, to recognise what their strengths are and support their strengths and support the development of the things they're passionate about.

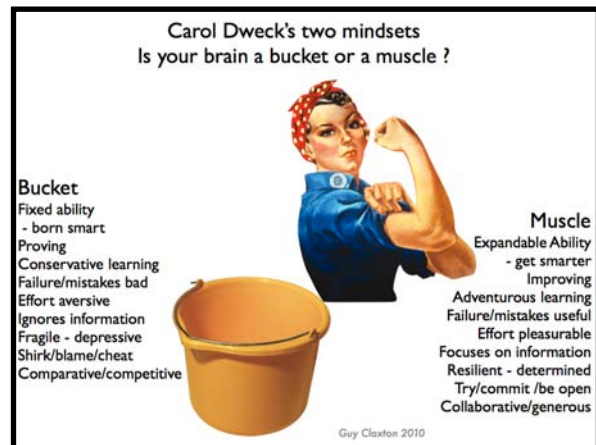
We all know that Mark Zuckerberg went on to develop one of the most popular social networking sites in the world 'Facebook' and I wonder without his parent's support would he have developed such a strong interest in Information Communication Technology?

STRANDS OF TE WHĀRIKI	LEARNING DISPOSITIONS	The Four R's	LEARNING ENVIRONMENT Will be:	CHILDREN'S QUESTIONS
BELONGING MANA WHENUA	COURAGE (AND CURIOSITY) To find something of interest here	RESOURCEFUL & RESILIENT	INTERESTING	DO YOU KNOW ME?
WELL-BEING MANA ATUA	TRUST (AND PLAYFULNESS)	RESOURCEFUL	TRUSTWORTHY	CAN I TRUST YOU?
EXPLORATION MANA AOTŪROA	PERSEVERANCE To tackle and persist with difficulty or uncertainty	RESILIENCE	CHALLENGING	DO YOU LET ME TRY?
COMMUNICATION MANA REO	CONFIDENCE To express an idea, a feeling or a point of view	REFLECTION	LISTENING	DO YOU HEAR ME?
CONTRIBUTION MANA TANGATA	RESPONSIBILITY For justice and fairness, and the disposition to take on another point of view	RELATING	COLLABORATIVE	IS THIS PLACE FAIR FOR US?

Adapted from Carr, M. (1998) Assessing Children's Experiences in Early Childhood Settings. Three DVDs and an accompanying booklet. Wellington (New Zealand Council for Educational Research)

In Aotearoa New Zealand we are very familiar with learning dispositions associated with Te Whāriki and Learning Stories, Curiosity, Trust and Playfulness, Perseverance, Confidence and Responsibility. Guy Claxton refers to Building Learning Power (BLP), Resilience, Resourceful, Reflecting, and Relating, which fit in well with Learning Dispositions. In our early childhood settings the language we use to support children's image of themselves as a competent and

capable learner matters a great deal. The conversations and language we use when we identify learning can be the vehicle for children and adults to build learning power and through children's passions and ongoing interests children are identifying what it means to be a learner. What goes hand in hand here is Carol Dweck's (2006) work around mindset where children have the view of their brain as a muscle, and the more you use your brain (like any muscle) the more you are going to be able to use it. Through the conversations we have with children and in the Learning Stories we write we can help children to understand the language of learning.



In Guy's article *Learning is learnable (and we ought to teach it)* he writes,

[...] growing more intelligent is not just a matter of learning a few techniques, or even mastering some new skills like 'critical thinking'. It is as much to do with attitudes, beliefs, emotional tolerances and values. And these change more slowly. You can't change someone's interest in learning, or their stickability, overnight. But schools and classrooms have systematic, cumulative influence, as surely as rivers wear away their banks. For example, when teachers change their way of talking with their students about learning, those students' attitudes can change, in turn, within a term (and by the way, their results go up). (2004, p. 2).

When we talk about the how of learning with children we need to reflect on how we ask children about their learning. It is about being as obvious and deliberate as asking "I wonder how you learnt that?" or "How did you learn that?" You might ask children to think about what the tricky parts of what they were doing were. Ask children to think about why they kept on trying. It is the language we use, the questions we ask, as well as the praise we give, that contribute to building children's identity as a competent and capable learner and knower.

As Guy says in the foreword of *Learning Power Heroes* (Delaney et al., 2009, p.1),

We need to be careful to be at our learning best around young children, especially if they like or admire us, for their 'heroes' are the people whose habits they will find most contagious. Capitalising on this rubbing-off of learning habits gives us a powerful way of influencing children's development - for good or ill.

We have to model being a good learner and share with children our curiosity, our resilience, and we are not always going to have the answer but are ready, willing and able to find out.

One of the centres I have supported in their Professional Development journey is Pigeon Mountain Kindergarten and over the last few years they have been working with children and their families to build their learning power. They are focussing on the 4 R's of learning power (Resilience, Resourceful, Reflecting, and Relating) as well as the learning dispositions. Around the walls of their centre is evidence of building learning power (BLP), a display of clay work includes how this experience relates to learning power. There is a large display with an adult audience in mind sharing why BLP is important, with A4 photos sharing BLP in action, Learning Stories talk about BLP. The teachers would say it is not about the physical environment, rather it is about the language and conversations between adults and children and children and adults, which share learning that is happening. Trying something new, practicing, trying hard, thinking, planning, revisiting, listening, kindness, collaborating, and sharing ideas are all phrases used when talking and writing about BLP.

In some of the Learning Stories I write I talk about being a good learner and what I know about good learners, "Good learners know how to manage distractions and stay focussed on what they are doing and this is what I saw you doing today" is an example from one of my Learning Stories. Alternatively, I might use a bit of 'Dweck', "Children learn best from slightly difficult tasks that they have to struggle through and this is what you did today" or I might talk about a child being a curious learner. Whatever I write I am considering the language of learning.

As I finish this article, I have cause to reflect on my own learning dispositions and learning power as my son gave me a ukelele for my birthday. Instead of learning chords, I decided to learn a song that I like. Talk about learning through my mistakes and my struggle! What I am learning is not only the song, but also about myself as a learner, that I know that if I practice I will be able to do this. It is good to try something new, but please do not expect a concert anytime soon.

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